

FIERY JOE



FIERY JOE

THE MAVERICK WHO LIT UP THE WEST

KATHLEEN CARLISLE

WITH EILEEN FORRIETER



University of Regina Press

© 2017 University of Regina Press

All rights reserved. No part of this work covered by the copyrights hereon may be reproduced or used in any form or by any means — graphic, electronic, or mechanical — without the prior written permission of the publisher. Any request for photocopying, recording, taping or placement in information storage and retrieval systems of any sort shall be directed in writing to Access Copyright.

Printed and bound in Canada at Marquis. The text of this book is printed on 100% post-consumer recycled paper with earth-friendly vegetable-based inks.

Cover: Duncan Campbell, University of Regina Press

Text design: John van der Woude, JVDW Designs

Copy editor: Kirsten Craven

Proofreader: Kristine Douaud

Indexer: Patricia Furdek

Cover art: “Tangled Wires” by aon168 / iStock Photo

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Carlisle, Kathleen, author

Fiery Joe : the maverick who lit up the west / Kathleen Carlisle with Eileen Forrieter.

Includes bibliographical references and index. Issued in print and electronic formats. ISBN 978-0-88977-485-8 (softcover).—ISBN 978-0-88977-486-5 (PDF).—ISBN 978-0-88977-487-2 (HTML)

1. Phelps, Joseph Lee, 1899-1983. 2. Politicians—Saskatchewan—Biography.
3. Saskatchewan—Politics and government—20th century.
4. Saskatchewan—Biography. I. Forrieter, Eileen, author II. Title.

FC3525.1.P54C37 2017 971.24'02092 C2017-900251-1 C2017-900252-X

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



U OF R PRESS

University of Regina Press, University of Regina
Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada, S4S 0A2
tel: (306) 585-4758 fax: (306) 585-4699
web: www.uofrpress.ca

We acknowledge the support of the Canada Council for the Arts for our publishing program. We acknowledge the financial support of the Government of Canada. / Nous reconnaissons l'appui financier du gouvernement du Canada. This publication was made possible through Creative Saskatchewan's Creative Industries Production Grant Program.

Canada Council
for the Arts



Conseil des Arts
du Canada

Canada

creative
SASKATCHEWAN

*In memory of Ella Little, who understood
the historical significance of her father's
unique brand of dirigisme, social democratic
ideals, and entrepreneurial spirit.*

CONTENTS

Foreword—*Roy Romanow* **ix**
Acknowledgements **xiii**
Introduction **xv**

PART I. PRELUDE TO POWER, 1899–1944

1. Land of Opportunity **3**
2. A New Political Landscape **12**
3. Common Ground **31**
4. Stormy Weather **44**

PART II. IN GOVERNMENT, 1944–1948

5. Maverick Dreamer **63**
6. Thunderstruck **84**
7. Power to the People **98**
8. Airborne **108**
9. The Fur Trade **116**
10. Fish, Trees, and Land **130**
11. Nature's Storehouse **150**
12. The Problem Children **164**
13. Turning Points **189**

PART III. ACTION AND ACTIVISM, 1948–1983

14. "It's Time to Put the Spurs and Knuckle Dusters On" **215**
15. The Western Development Museum **244**
16. The People's Commission **255**
17. Action Now **269**

Epilogue: “Never Say Whoa in the Middle of a Mud Puddle!” **277**

Notes **293**

Selected Bibliography **345**

Index **351**

FOREWORD

At the turn of the twentieth century, Saskatchewan often was a lonely place, dominated by vast farmlands and buffeted by an unpredictable climate. For the thousands of settlers who came to Saskatchewan to build new lives, the seemingly endless prairie took great courage to homestead. It also took something else—the capacity to dream, and dream “big.” Joe Phelps personified these characteristics. His contribution to building Saskatchewan and Canada is an important demonstration of what big dreams can achieve.

Joe Phelps came of age during a time of great adversity. He arrived in Saskatchewan from Ontario in 1909 to join his father, who had come earlier in pursuit of new opportunities. Unpredictable weather, stormy grain markets, and large distances posed constant challenges to the hopes of the Phelps family and to the residents of the province. While Joe’s older brother fought in the First World War and his father fell into a period of depression, the younger Phelps took on the responsibility of operating a farm and the numerous associated challenges.

He also quickly came to understand the fragility of what was, then, a one-commodity provincial economy. That fragility was further underlined by the impact of the Great Depression of 1929. It was this Great Depression that fuelled Joe Phelps’s belief that unbridled free enterprise and unrestrained capitalism exacerbated the economic devastation by their inability to deal fairly with the unconscionable and rising levels of economic and social inequity. Thus, he grew to strongly believe that government and local co-operative initiatives, led by ordinary citizens, would produce the economic diversification necessary to lessen the province’s economic dependency on the wheat economy, while also implementing important and positive reforms to the capitalist system.

All of this led Joe Phelps to seek a new political approach to remedy the situation. He found that message of hope in the founding of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) in 1932. Attracted and motivated by the powerful oratory of building the so-called New Jerusalem, as articulated by Tommy Douglas and other social-democratic activists, the CCF's ideas began to resonate throughout western Canada and, in particular, within Saskatchewan.

Few were more passionate or committed to the ideals of the CCF than Joe Phelps. He envisioned this new Prairie movement as the political vehicle to build a more just, more diversified, and more plentiful province. Thus, it was inevitable that Joe Phelps would enter elective political life. He became one of the most fiery and compelling advocates for the goals of the CCF. In 1938, he won political office as the CCF member for Saltcoats. And, when Douglas and his team swept into government in 1944, Joe Phelps became a senior member of that first Douglas Cabinet. He brought with him his philosophical commitment to social democracy, his perpetual optimism, and his "can do" work ethic. This was a perfect fit with the new Douglas Government, and was precisely what a challenged Saskatchewan needed.

The first Douglas term of office saw the enactment of numerous and transformative social and economic reforms. It was a blizzard of activity. Rural electrification, public hospitalization insurance, which later led to public medicare, and a blossoming of new Crown corporations to stimulate economic growth to defeat the worst impacts of the depression were some of the hallmarks of that first Douglas term.

These large and ambitious ideas required energetic and committed activists if they were to become reality. In his new role as Minister of Natural Resources and Industrial Development, armed with a persistent belief in the merits of public ownership of the means of production, Joe Phelps fit the needs of the new task perfectly. With unsurpassed enthusiasm, Joe Phelps introduced many innovative economic initiatives. Crown corporations, such as SaskPower, were organized to become vehicles for economic and social development. The Crown corporations generated wealth and employment, and provided much-needed services to the people of Saskatchewan. They also demonstrated an alternative to private, for-profit corporations. Moreover, new public corporations were created to diversify the economy by processing primary products into consumer goods.

But unbridled hope and optimism collided with harsh economic and fiscal reality. Investments in enterprises such as a brick plant, a shoe factory, a box factory, and a woollen mill failed to make a profit. The failure of these ambitious businesses highlighted the reality of limited human resources and manufacturing experience, small markets, large distances, and the ironclad rules of the market economy in which these enterprises had to operate. Moreover, critics successfully argued that ideology and unrealistic ambitions had trumped methodical decision making and the recognition that Canada based its economic growth on private enterprise.

Thus, the philosophy of the social democratic movement of the 1944 election met vociferous economic and political opposition. The Douglas Government and Joe Phelps came under sustained and serious criticism of their policies and their refusal to acknowledge the overarching disciplines of the free-enterprise market economy.

The 1948 general provincial election was fought, in large measure, on the merits of these many bold, new initiatives of economic diversification. The optimism of 1944 was swept away by a return to the traditional voting patterns in Joe Phelps's constituency. And 1948 saw the defeat of Joe Phelps in the Saltcoats constituency. The controversies surrounding the numerous and complex commercial and financial undertakings ensured that Joe Phelps's re-election campaign would be unsuccessful.

Looking back at this moment in Saskatchewan history, few would doubt that it represented a remarkable period of renewal, experimentation, and optimism. In large measure, much credit is to be assigned to the principled, exuberant, and persuasive personality exhibited by Joe Phelps inside and outside Cabinet. Even after his electoral defeat, his reform agenda and undying optimism never left him. Thus, his accomplishments are not to be underestimated. His contributions assisted ordinary Saskatchewan people to maintain their hope and to eventually see the province recover from the ravages of the Great Depression and the World Wars.

Although Joe Phelps's time in elective office was short, his contribution to Saskatchewan remains timeless. His commitment to the people of Saskatchewan and his social democratic principles, his constant enthusiasm, and his never-ending capacity to "dream the big dreams" are demonstrated by his achievements.

Moreover, Joe Phelps's contributions to civil society did not end with his electoral defeat. He continued the pursuit of his ideals as a fierce voice

xii FOREWORD

for farmers as president of the Saskatchewan Farmers Union. Moreover, his dedication to respecting, understanding, and preserving the history of our shared Prairie destiny led to the foundation and growth of the Western Development Museum of Saskatchewan.

Kathleen Carlisle has eloquently and thoroughly explored the life and accomplishments of Joe Phelps. By understanding more about this “maverick dreamer,” his ideals, vision, and principles, we also learn a lot more about the great province of Saskatchewan.

—Roy J. Romanow, *April 20, 2016*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book was in the making for over a decade and many people contributed to the process along the way.

First, a tribute to my co-author, Eileen Forrieter. Although ours was not a collaboration in the usual sense, her contribution to *Fiery Joe* is such that “authorship” is the necessary and fitting acknowledgement. Ms. Forrieter spent several years researching Joe Phelps’s political career, culminating in her master’s thesis, “Joseph Lee Phelps: An Impulsive Radical” (2005). She freely shared her research with me and granted permission to include excerpts directly from her thesis. These excerpts are found throughout parts I and II, and more specifically in chapters 3, 4, 5, and 12. The addition of her fine work added the depth and breadth of research that was required to produce a balanced and comprehensive historical biography of Joe Phelps. Sadly, Ms. Forrieter died suddenly on March 18, 2015, and so did not live to see the completion of the book. I am tremendously grateful for her careful scholarship and her generosity, and I am honoured to share authorship with her on this project.

I would like to extend my thanks to Roberta Mitchell Coulter for her wise critique of an early manuscript, expert editing, and suggestions for improvement, and most recently for the arduous process of reducing the size of the manuscript prior to publication. I would also like to thank University of Regina Press, especially Karen May Clark, acquisitions editor, and Bruce Walsh, director and publisher, for their publishing and marketing acumen and expertise, as well as senior editor Donna Grant and copy editor Kirsten Craven.

I am also grateful to Dr. Bill Brennan, who acted as thesis supervisor for Eileen Forrieter’s work noted above. His appraisal of an early draft of the manuscript was essential to completing this book.

xiv ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Stuart Thiesson, a long-time farm activist and executive secretary of the Saskatchewan Farmers Union for many years, was also a tremendous help. Stuart's knowledge of the voluntary farm movement was essential to documenting Phelps's involvement in the movement. Thanks also to Chris Hansen, Bruce Dodds, and Herbert Schulz for their excellent suggestions. All provided valuable input, particularly in the chapters related to agriculture, and I am grateful.

Thank you to Douglas Charrett of Prince Albert, who completed an initial manuscript titled "The Life and Times of Fiery Joe Phelps" in 2003, and to Larry Shaak of Moose Jaw, who conducted an extensive series of interviews with many of Joe Phelps's colleagues and associates from his years in government, the farm movement, and in British Columbia, as well as many of Joe's family members at the same time. Thanks also to Lois Simmie, who provided input on Douglas Charrett's early manuscript. Kathryn Nogue provided suggestions and proofreading, and Dr. Stuart Houston provided feedback early in the process. Thanks also to my partner, Garry Walsh, who has been a tremendous help throughout the project.

Finally, thank you to Dr. David Goranson, who along with his mother, Ella Little, initiated this book and whose Phelpsian persistence and tenacity ensured that it reached completion.

INTRODUCTION

Joseph Lee Phelps has been described as a “human dynamo.”¹ He was unequivocally a man of action. His outspoken voice echoes in archival documents and the recollections of those who lived and worked with him. Deemed by his colleagues in government and the farm movement to be “volcanic,” “charismatic,” and “fiery,” Phelps propelled himself into leadership roles where he could effect genuine change unhampered. Never reluctant to express his frustration with those who did not share his enthusiasm and drive, or who could not keep up, he left behind a compelling, and at times controversial, legacy. Indeed, many consider Phelps to be one of Saskatchewan’s most memorable and colourful political figures.²

Saskatchewan has been one of the most politically progressive of Canada’s provinces, introducing many innovative policies, including universal health care.³ In July 1944, the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation took office in Saskatchewan, forming North America’s first social democratic government. Led by Tommy Douglas, it advocated sweeping reforms that would dramatically alter the social, economic, and political landscape of the province. To implement the CCF plan, Premier Douglas turned not only to outside experts but also to those who had proven their mettle in provincial farm and labour movements, like Joe Phelps, who as Minister of Natural Resources and Industrial Development would become a key member of his team. Phelps’s indefatigable work ethic, courage, and ideological commitment to the ideals of the party made him the perfect fit for this challenging post. Indeed, Phelps initiated many of the significant changes brought about by the Douglas Government in Saskatchewan. Impatient with the status quo, his propensity for quick, decisive action meant he often forged ahead

with blatant disregard for conventional bureaucratic procedures, earning the respect and admiration of many, cautious skepticism from those who favoured a more conventional approach, and outright disdain from those who opposed his ideas. Not surprisingly, some historians have not looked favourably on Phelps's rather unconventional approach. His involvement in the province's early attempts to diversify Saskatchewan's economy garnered mixed reviews. Some of Phelps's early forays into businesses such as a shoe factory have been ridiculed and dismissed as misguided ventures, but his efforts to establish publicly owned and administered businesses were important in the ongoing struggle to diversify Saskatchewan's economy through added-value agricultural enterprises. Joe Phelps played a prominent role in the Douglas Government's ability to turn, as Gregory Marchildon has put it, "a relatively isolated and poverty-stricken province into Canada's most important social laboratory."⁴ The public ownership of utilities and the building of a modern infrastructure, in which Crown corporations played a major role, were ground-breaking initiatives led by Phelps; they have been instrumental in the long-term stability of the province ever since.

Similarly, Phelps's prominent role in Saskatchewan's agrarian history is particularly salient to the current agricultural situation, including the disintegration of the family farm and the futile struggle to protect the Canadian Wheat Board. Herbert Schulz, grassroots organizer for the Manitoba Farmers Union (MFU) and author of *Betrayal: Prairie Agricultural Politics in the Fifties*, argues that decisions taken since Phelps's time have resulted in the current circumstances in Canadian agriculture. Phelps and Herbert's father, Jake Schulz (who together were known as the "Terrible Twins" during their heyday as grassroots farm organizers), predicted that these decisions would lead to fewer farms, impossible debt loads, and "neo-feudal" control of agricultural processing, arguing, "The yeoman farmer who opened the West and built the community is being reduced to a serf. If vertical integration of agriculture continues he will end up as a hired man on his own land working for subsidized, non-resident investors."⁵ Phelps's minority report for the Saskatchewan Royal Commission on Agriculture and Rural Life in 1958 stands as the most complete and mature expression of his views on agriculture and farm organization, and is a poignant and timely reminder of what might have been had his advice been heeded.

Championing causes that were not always widely embraced or popular, often with considerable personal sacrifice, was difficult and at times disappointing for Phelps. His energy and vision earned him positions as director of the United Farmers of Canada (Saskatchewan section) (UFC), charter member of the CCF, Minister of Natural Resources in the first social democratic government in North America, first president of the Saskatchewan Farmers Union (SFU), chairman of the Interprovincial Farm Union Council, a member of the Saskatchewan Royal Commission on Agriculture and Rural Life, and a place in the Saskatchewan Agricultural Hall of Fame. The two decades of his life that he spent collecting and restoring vintage machinery and establishing the province's Western Development Museum remain with Saskatchewan people and provide concrete documentation of the ingenuity and monumental changes in Saskatchewan's material culture over the course of the twentieth century.

Phelps's ability to advance important projects rapidly and efficiently, to organize and mobilize people at the grassroots level, to reconcile competing claims or interests when necessary, to resist or embrace compromise when required, gauging goals against obstacles and at the same time satisfying high ethical and ideological standards in a practical way, distinguish him as one of Saskatchewan's great pioneers.⁶ He lived an exciting life, and he excited many people along the way.⁷

Much of the impetus for Phelps's involvement in social movements originates in the circumstances of his upbringing and the values he learned growing up on a farm. By many accounts he was a farmer through and through—a fact demonstrated by his resourcefulness and practicality. He always had coveralls handy wherever he went (in the trunk of his car, and in baggage when travelling by air), which he was quick to don should someone happen to need a hand. The smell of the horse liniment he used to soothe his aching muscles was often evident,⁸ as were his characteristic expressions: "By jingles, Nellie!" he'd exclaim, banging his hand down brusquely on the nearest solid object when he spoke about something that inspired him.

Joe Phelps left his mark on this province in the improvement of rural life, the political culture of Saskatchewan people, and the preservation of history. He was an important voice in the province; a man who lit up Saskatchewan in so many ways. This is his story.



PART I

PRELUDE TO POWER

1899-1944

CHAPTER 1

LAND OF OPPORTUNITY

In the fall of 1908, nine-year-old Joe Phelps was riding high in the cupola of a red caboosé, a guest of the crew of the train that would take his family halfway across Canada. He was going to join his father, big brother, and sister on their homestead in Saskatchewan, a place that had held his father's attention almost exclusively for three years.¹ Even when his father returned to Ontario for the winter, his dreams remained in the West, a land of freedom, boundless potential, and adventure. Young Joe was travelling with his mother, his younger brother, Don, and sisters Eva and Lulu to join the rest of the family in a one-room, twelve-by-sixteen-foot shack. Theirs was the first train to travel the new line from Saskatoon to Wilkie; the rest of the family had come down through the Battlefords, travelling by Red River cart on a rutted track.² Joseph Phelps was the second son and third of six children born to George Phelps and Caroline Phelps at Thurlow, Ontario, on August 12, 1899.³

As he looked out from the caboosé, Joe saw miles of prairie grass, interrupted by sparse scrub brush and the occasional shallow coulee. Though the land had recently been divided into a checkerboard of townships, each consisting of thirty-six square miles of farmland, each divided into quarter sections of 160 acres, the order imposed had not yet made its physical impression on the land. In each township, two quarters had been set aside for the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) and two for schools, while odd-numbered quarters were kept

4 I: PRELUDE TO POWER, 1899–1944

for the Crown or the railways, and even-numbered quarters were intended for homesteaders.⁴ With the nearest neighbours several miles away, the Phelps family would have spent many lonely evenings on the homestead.

Four years earlier, George Phelps and his wife Caroline (Carrie) made the decision that they and their six children would leave their farm at Tweed near Belleville, Ontario, and move to the new frontier, as George's Irish Protestant family had done in the early 1800s when they left Massachusetts and moved to Brantford.⁵ Enthusiastic about the cheap land and the potential he saw on the Saskatchewan prairie, George had obtained entry for the homestead on May 25, 1905, the year Saskatchewan became a province.⁶ He chose land just north of Wilkie and travelled to Saskatchewan that fall to begin breaking the prairie.⁷ Before he returned to Ontario the first winter, he had cultivated forty acres of prairie grass to sow to wheat the following spring. He spent most of the next two years at the homestead, farming.

A year before young Joe made the journey, in the fall of 1907, George and his two eldest children, Fred and Etta, travelled to Saskatchewan with the first of three railway cars of settlers' effects: household items, farm equipment, and even livestock. They also brought planed oak lumber from the trees that grew on their Ontario farm, laying it flat a foot thick on the floor of the railway freight car and packing their other belongings on top. The oak eventually became flooring in the house that remains to this day on the homestead.



The Phelps family homestead, Wilkie, Saskatchewan, date unknown. Permission granted by the Phelps family estate.

THE LAST BEST WEST

Promotional efforts by the Immigration Branch of Canada's Department of the Interior portraying the West as a land of opportunity—"the Last Best West"—had convinced George and thousands of others to move west. In 1905, over nineteen thousand new homesteads were taken out.⁸ Pamphlets described "a healthy climate guaranteed to be free of malaria," hot prairie summers that were "delightfully invigorating," and winters that were "cold but dry and not unpleasant."⁹ The spirit of adventure and the promise of a better life, along with the offer of 160 acres of land for a ten-dollar registration fee, provided enough incentive to make the move. In exchange, they were required to build habitable houses, prepare twenty-five acres of land for seeding, and live on the land for three years.

By the spring of 1909, George had complied with all of the homestead requirements and had also disposed of his property in Ontario. By this time, the Phelps homestead had 120 acres cropped, six horses, eleven cattle, and two hogs. George had also built a twenty-eight-foot-square sod barn, four hundred rods of fence, a frame granary, and a well. Together with the house, these assets were valued at \$620, with no mortgages or transfers against the property.¹⁰ His financial situation would not always be as promising, and George's optimism would be severely tempered by the hardships to come—the short growing season, low rainfall, and long winters, along with economic instability and uncertainty.

Farm women worked equally hard in those days, without electricity and running water. Carrie looked after all the domestic chores, including curing much of the family's meat in a smokehouse constructed of scraps of leftover lumber, as well as sewing, knitting, and caring for the six children. But this work was not enough to satisfy the former schoolteacher. She set up the first Ladies' Aid of the Narrow Lake district and was its president for a number of years, arranging quilting bees and other activities. Many pioneer families could not afford health care, and often a doctor was not available, so Carrie also acted as midwife and nurse for the area, and was frequently the first to be called to tend an illness or birth.¹¹

Although there are very few references to Joe's religious inclinations, his mother apparently had a strict regime of religious instruction, and as a young man Joe aspired to the ministry, which perhaps would later contribute to the appeal of the social gospel message in the CCF's ideology.¹²

Joe attended Starview School in Wilkie for a time and played baseball for the Narrow Lake Britons at local sports days and on Sundays in the early 1920s, and became the team's manager in 1926. Saturday nights were spent at dances, and the affable Joe found himself in demand for square dance calling.

The matched team of driving horses brought from Ontario took the family to town for supplies and visiting, and worked long hours alongside the men in the fields. Joe repaid the horses with devotion and treated them with kindness. He remained a respected horseman throughout his life and was often called upon to judge horses and plowing matches, sliding easily from the role of politician to horseman. As Joe's son Bruce recalled of his father: "No one ever dared abuse a horse in front of my dad! In the field he would stop after every round and give the horses a rest. He also made sure they were wiped down and well fed at the end of the day.... He certainly respected them."¹³

Described as a land of opportunity, the West was essentially a colony of eastern Canada. Since 1885, there had been a slow but steady influx of Central Canadian, English, European, and American immigrants. At the turn of the century, the government of Canada had increased its promotional efforts to encourage settlement, and the pace accelerated. The first to feel the impact of the expansion westward were the First Nations. To facilitate future development and unrestricted access to the land and resources, the Canadian government had moved quickly to negotiate treaties to extinguish Aboriginal title to land suitable for farming before Saskatchewan became a province in 1905.¹⁴ Conservative Prime Minister John A. Macdonald was then free to institute his National Policy's three pillars: settling the West to produce grain and raw materials and provide markets for eastern business; building a transcontinental railway to transport settlers and manufactured goods to and raw materials from the West; and establishing a tariff wall to protect eastern manufacturers from foreign competition. The steady stream of settlers turned into a flood, increasing the province's population from around thirty thousand in 1885 to over 640,000 by 1916.¹⁵ It was a captive market that only eastern Canada would be able to service, and over the next century Prairie farmers would engage in an arduous struggle to alter the colonial status of their region.

When the Phelps family arrived in Saskatchewan, farmers had already begun to fight for reforms. They had little control over many

farm-related matters, especially grain prices, freight rates, and machinery costs. As a growing sense of antagonism toward the big grain companies emerged, many farmers turned to political action. Settlers brought with them diverse views and experiences, including a familiarity with farm organizations, trade unions, and a variety of socialist and other political traditions. There was some inequality amongst them—land quality varied, and some settlers brought more resources with them than others—but for the most part, farmers were a relatively homogeneous economic class. And although they were from diverse cultural backgrounds, they were bound together not only by the relative “classlessness” of the new frontier but also by their common experience of forging a living on it. The economy of the fledgling province was based exclusively on one commodity, wheat, and unpredictable weather made the single cash crop economy very risky. Many farmers became debtors, borrowing money in the hope of earning more in the future.

Farm groups such as the Patrons of Industry had been formed as early as 1891 to address issues related to the sale, movement, and price of grain, and the excessive freight rates and tariffs imposed.¹⁶ In 1897, the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) ordered that wheat delivery must go through grain elevators. Farmers who had been loading grain directly into boxcars suspected monopoly price fixing, and future problems with the weighing and grading of their grain. When the 1901 bumper crop overloaded the elevator system,¹⁷ farmers joined together to protest, forming the Territorial Grain Growers’ Association, which became the Saskatchewan Grain Growers’ Association (SGGA) in 1905.¹⁸ Their first victory gave farmers the right to order railway cars on the same terms as the elevator companies, and reinforced their belief in the benefits of collective action. The SGGA boasted 1,300 branches and a membership of twenty-eight thousand by 1916.

THE CO-OPERATIVE SPIRIT

In such a demanding and unforgiving environment, settlers had to work together. Co-operative effort was the only effective political and social strategy. Besides, they were lonely. It was common for people to participate in work bees and share their resources. Often families joined together to purchase a railcar load of supplies such as flour, twine, coal,

and feed. This practice soon led to the formation of local co-operatives in small towns across the Prairies.

In 1911, the SGGA convinced the Scott Liberal government to pass legislation to form the Saskatchewan Co-operative Elevator Company, creating an elevator system owned and operated by farmers with substantial support from the government. Two years later, the government passed the Agricultural Co-operative Associations Act, which helped farmers set up local co-operatives to purchase farm supplies at lower prices, and established a Co-operative Organization Branch within the Department of Agriculture. The co-operative movement began to shape the unique political and social consciousness that was emerging in Saskatchewan.¹⁹

As a young farmer, Joe Phelps began to take an active interest in farm politics, attending SGGA meetings with Alex Cotter, secretary of the Narrow Lake local. By 1916, seventeen-year-old Joe was elected a district director of the SGGA.²⁰ Discussion of local trading association issues, such as buying carloads of coal, twine, or other supplies, dominated SGGA meetings. But Joe had much bigger things on his mind:

I was grumbling to Alex on the way home about why we could not find something else to discuss except what to buy. Alex thought I had a good point. The last meeting I attended they were still talking about what to buy and when to buy and I was getting more disgusted all the time. I was 18 then, and was standing toward the rear of the room with my arm along a ledge. All at once I decided to give them a good jolt and go home. I walked out into the center of the room and tied into them. I can remember standing in the middle of the floor swinging my arms. That was the last meeting I attended, although I retained my membership for another year or two.²¹

This incident would become typical of Phelps's involvement in politics. He had little patience for bureaucratic procedures and organizations that focused on the mundane. He did not hesitate to "give a good jolt" when he felt a situation required it, and his ability as a forceful and flamboyant orator continued to develop throughout his career, with "the charisma to stir even the most passive souls with a sense of indignation—and hope."²²

“TOUGH SLEDDING”

Soon after the First World War broke out, Joe's older brother Fred enlisted and left the farm to serve overseas. Joe called the hard times that followed “tough sledding.” To support the war effort, farmers were encouraged to increase production with government loans to farmers and their of-age sons to start or augment herds. George Phelps arranged for the maximum line of credit for both himself and his two eldest boys, and they went into beef cattle in a big way. They seeded all the cultivated land they had in 1918, but they soon felt the wrath of the elements, losing most of the seed to an early frost. The same year, they bought two railcar loads of breeding heifers and one carload of feeders at a cost of \$87 each, with loans for two-thirds of the money from the government and one-third from the bank. Unfortunately, the bottom dropped out of the beef cattle market, making the cattle worth a fraction of their initial cost. The Phelpses kept the cattle for two years, waiting for a market, paying up to twenty-five cents each for oat sheaves, which had to be shipped in during the winter of 1918. The cattle were eventually taken to Winnipeg for sale, and George netted only about \$43 a head for the three-year-olds.²³

This experience remained permanently seared in Joe's mind, and the adversity and stress took its toll on the Phelps family. George suffered from severe depression and was hospitalized in Prince Albert. Pressures from the unpredictable weather and unstable farm economy, combined with the isolation and hardship of daily living, were resulting in an increasingly widespread incidence of mental breakdown among Prairie farmers. Mental illness was a source of shame at that time and so was rarely spoken of, but in small communities neighbours knew each other's hardships. Although just in his mid-teens, with his brother Fred overseas, Joe was the oldest boy in the family. Of necessity, his formal education stopped at grade six as he took on the responsibility of managing the farm and looking after the family.²⁴ When George returned from the hospital, his condition did not completely stabilize, and Joe continued to shoulder the bulk of the load, supporting the family both financially and emotionally. He took advantage of a free construction and repair course with the Narrow Lake Telephone Company, and in his late teens found long-term employment there to supplement the family's farm income.

The rural telephone system was expanding, and Joe would remain with the company for the next twenty-two years.²⁵

When Fred returned from the war, he married and moved to a farm of his own, but he had been profoundly wounded. The horrific carnage of the First World War changed the generation of young men who returned to Saskatchewan and the rest of Canada, and their massive suffering and sacrifice affected Joe deeply. He came to share the anti-imperialist views advocated by J. S. Woodsworth and others in a new political movement that would emerge in the early 1930s. Along with unstable grain and livestock prices and myriad related problems, this motivated Joe and other farmers in similar circumstances to seek political solutions.

Joe turned to political action naturally: his father was a strong Liberal and had faith in men like William Motherwell, founding president of the SGGA. Joe later recalled that his father had always been sympathetic to the Grain Growers and had been a fairly active member, but at this point farmers had many reasons to be dissatisfied with the conservative SGGA.²⁶ Some felt that its leadership and the government overlapped too much. William Motherwell, co-founder and first president of the Territorial Grain Growers Association, served as Minister of Agriculture from 1905 to 1918. George Langley, who entered the Cabinet in 1912, and Charles Dunning, who followed in 1916 and became premier in 1922, had both been active in the SGGA. J. A. Maharg, another SGGA president, also joined the government as agriculture minister. Farmer dissatisfaction with the SGGA led to the appearance of a rival farmers' organization, the Farmers' Union of Canada (FUC), founded in December 1921 at Ituna.²⁷ Little wonder that when an Alberta man named Harris held a meeting in the Narrow Lake School to introduce the FUC and its plan to unite farmers to fight for a better deal, young Joe was tremendously impressed. Eight people were needed to form an FUC lodge in their own region. When Alex Cotter, the secretary of the Grain Growers' local, joined the seven people present at the first meeting, the first Wilkie area Farmers' Union local was formed.²⁸ Phelps, who considered the SGGA too staid, became one of the FUC's first members.²⁹ He later said, "When I heard their program and knew what they were after, I darned quick switched over... I just left the Grain Growers because they were too old-fashioned for me altogether. I wanted to go faster than they were prepared to go."³⁰ By 1924, the FUC had ten thousand members.